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Flunking the Final

Matthew 26:69-75

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer paid the ultimate price for this opposition to the Nazis and we rightly celebrate his witness. He was hung in Tegel prison for his opposition to Hitler. As many of us know, he was one of the principal authors of the *Barmen Declaration*, a stirring credal statement found within our *Book of Confessions.* He is also the author of *The Cost of Discipleship* and many other works. Late in his life, just before his execution, he wrote a poem called 'Night Thoughts in Tegel,' in which this saint confessed his own complicity in the sin of Nazism. Listen to his words:

> **We saw the lie raise its head**
> **And we did not honor the truth.**
> **We saw the brethren in direst need**
> **And feared only our own death.**
> **We come before Thee as men,**
> **As confessors of our sins.**

That's how all of us come before God this Sunday in which we transition from the celebration of Palm Sunday into a respectful reflection on Passion Sunday. All of us, as ordinary people whose greatest righteousness, if we have any, is that we are confessors of our sins.

In his book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Daniel Goldhagen accounted for the way ordinary Germans all participated in Hitler's 'final solution.' It took everyone working in concert to keep quiet in the face of injustice, to work the trains, and round up the Jews, ask no questions and acquiesce in the evil. The final solution was not just the work of a few crazy leaders. It took everyone working together, ordinary people doing ordinary sin, that worked so vast an evil. Remember, the Nazis weren't a frenzied mob. They weren't peasants. They arose from one of the most civilized, most modern of nations. They were greeted warmly in the universities.

The problem with Goldhagen's analysis is that he assumes there was something peculiarly, particularly wrong with the Germans that led them to such evil. I think not. The stunning thing was not the extraordinary, special nature of their sin. It was the ordinariness of it all that made the story worth telling. Part of the horror was that the Germans were so 'normal' and the evil was so horribly ordinary.

And so is ours. Few of us will rise to the level of Judas's betrayal of Jesus. We won't conspire with the governmental authorities, and we won't do it for the money. But we will go along. Ours will be the more ordinary sin, staying silent when we should have spoken up, keeping our head down when we should have stood up and been counted, going along to get along.

That's why I focus on the familiar story of Peter's betrayal this morning. Simon Peter, the premier disciple who begins with a declaration of fidelity and commitment to Jesus, no matter what, and ends weeping because of his betrayal. Most of our betrayals have more in common with Peter than the betrayal of Judas. Peter is so like us. One fine day he is the A student in Christology 101. But this week peter flunks the final exam, blows it big.

"Weren't you with the Galilean?"

"I don't even know the man." This is from the guy who Jesus once called 'The Rock.' Maybe Jesus meant it as a joke?

And we love Peter for that because many times our brash declarations of faith are also a joke. 'I believe' we say in church. But back at work, or in the neighborhood, where there's a price to pay, we say 'Well, I've heard of Jesus but can't say that I really know him.'

I love the way Alcoholics Anonymous teaches its members to introduce themselves. "I'm Buzzy, and I'm an alcoholic, but by the help of a higher power, a recovering one." We love Peter for embodying that too. For we are, most of us, quite ordinary in our sin, and no redemption would do people like us any good that required us to be heroic. So maybe the first step toward our redemption, the first fumbling step is honesty.

During these Sundays of Lent, the scriptures have told us that we are sinners, the whole lot of us. For now nearly 40 days of Lent the church has been using its various means to get us to say, 'I'm Tom, and I'm a sinner, but by the help of a higher power, a recovering one.'

The church has always taught that Peter was the foundation of the church. The Pope in Rome says that he sits in direct apostolic succession from Peter. I don't know whether or not the Pope is so closely connected to Peter, but *we* sure are, ordinary, unspectacular betrayers.

You know, if I were writing the gospels, I would have been tempted to try to clean up the rock of the church. Must we be so honest about the spiritual condition of our great-great-granddaddy in the faith? Well, yeah, we must be. And I thank God that the early church had the guts to leave his story in our history.

Because, bottom line, we see the story of Peter as a sort of parable of our own infidelity to Jesus - and we see Jesus' amazingly gracious fidelity toward us. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, ordinary sinners in our ordinary sin. That's where he really meets us best, in our ordinary sin, and despite our ordinary but very real sin, he forgives us, loves us even yet. He loves us in a way so extraordinary this week, this holiest of weeks.

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